

**STATEMENT OF
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NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today in order to provide you with a review of the National Cemetery Administration's (NCA) accomplishments achieved during the last fiscal year, our plans for continuing to meet the needs of Veterans in the current year, and our efforts to identify the needs of our future Veterans. Before I begin, I wanted to note that one of our national cemeteries was recently recognized as one of the World's Most Beautiful Cemeteries; in an article published just in October, the Smithsonian's online magazine distinguished Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery for its "elegant simplicity." Such recognition is only made possible with the continued dedication of our employees as well as the continued support of our stakeholders, including the members of this subcommittee. I am accompanied by Mr. Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Programs, NCA. I look forward to testifying alongside our partners from the Army National Cemeteries and the American Battle Monuments Commission. The partnerships between our organizations continue to result in the sharing of best practices and a strengthened commitment to serving our Nation's Veterans.

I was appointed the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs this past June. I joined NCA in 2006, and most recently served as Acting Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and Deputy Under Secretary for Finance and Planning/Chief Financial

Officer prior to assuming my current position. While the process moves forward to identify a nominee for the Under Secretary position, I want to assure you that I, as well as all employees within the National Cemetery Administration, remain dedicated to continuing to serve Veterans and their families with the highest level of customer service. While the past fiscal year has been full of transition, both for NCA and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), it was also one in which we continued to accomplish our defined goals and advance many initiatives.

I would be remiss if I did not address the Department's "I CARE" core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence. These values are not abstractions in NCA. They are part of how we do business every single day. I CARE is a responsibility that never stops.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN

RECENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION

NCA employees continue to focus on our organizational mission to provide quality burial and memorial benefits to those who served in uniform to defend our Nation and for their families. NCA operates 131 national cemeteries and one national Veterans burial ground in 40 states and Puerto Rico, and 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. More than 4.2 million Americans, including Veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA national cemeteries on more than 8,800 developed acres of land.

NCA'S Continued Customer-Focus: I am pleased to report that for the fifth consecutive time, NCA achieved the highest score in either the private or public sector in the history of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI). The 2013 results of this prestigious, independent survey were published in January 2014 and demonstrated that NCA achieved a customer satisfaction index of 96. The score is 28 points above the 68 point average for Federal Government agencies. NCA participates in the ACSI every 3 years; it is the only national, cross-industry measure of direct customer satisfaction with the quality of

goods and services available in the United States. Beginning in 1999, the Federal Government selected ACSI to measure citizen satisfaction. The ACSI survey polled the next-of-kin or other people who had arranged for the interment of a loved one in a VA national cemetery 6-months to 1-year prior to the start of the survey. Surveys were sent to 2,500 people, 494 responded, a high response rate for a mail survey.

Continued Focus on Provision of Burial and Memorialization Benefits: With the close of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, NCA continued to serve Veterans and their families by performing over 125,000 interments—a record number for NCA. We continued to provide perpetual care for 3.4 million occupied gravesites that we maintain. We awarded \$28.8 million in National Shrine contracts to repair gravesites and to raise and realign headstones. NCA issued over 600,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates as well as provided over 350,000 headstone and markers and over 10,000 medallions.

Continued Increase of Veteran Access to a Burial Option: Great progress was made in FY 2014 as NCA continued to implement one of the largest expansions of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. By the end of this decade, VA plans to open an additional 18 new burial facilities to provide access to a burial option for over 680,000 additional previously unserved Veterans and to provide enhanced burial options for over 2 million Veterans. The new facilities include five new national cemeteries, two in Florida, one each in Colorado, Nebraska, and New York. These locations were determined when the Veteran population threshold was lowered from 170,000 to 80,000 unserved Veterans within a 75-mile service area. Additionally, in FY 2014 we began to implement our Urban Initiative and Rural Initiative that I will highlight in a moment. These expansions, along with continued grant awards to states, territories, and tribal organizations, will allow NCA to meet its strategic target of providing 96 percent of Veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their home.

On November 3, 2014, the Department of Navy transferred hundreds of acres of land from the former Alameda Naval Air Station to VA. This land will host an outpatient clinic for 9,000 Veterans and a columbaria-only national cemetery that will provide burial for 3,000 Veterans and their eligible family members. This past fiscal year, VA acquired land for the

new national cemeteries in Southern Colorado and Western New York, which finalizes all land acquisition steps for the five new national cemeteries. We also awarded construction contracts to build three national cemeteries: Cape Canaveral National Cemetery, Tallahassee National Cemetery, and Omaha National Cemetery. Together, the five new national cemeteries will provide a burial option to over 550,000 currently unserved Veterans, and their eligible family members. We continued land searches for urban satellite cemeteries in New York, Chicago, and Indianapolis, to provide columbaria-only cemeteries in urban locations where time and distance barriers to the existing national cemetery location have proven to be a challenge to burial and visitation.

I am pleased to announce that in FY 2014 we opened our first exclusively rural national Veterans burial ground in Montana. As the first of eight planned national Veterans burial grounds as part of the Department's rural burial initiative, Yellowstone National Cemetery was officially dedicated on Memorial Day 2014 and began serving the Veterans and their family members this year. We additionally continued land searches and acquisitions in seven other rural locations in Maine, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Wyoming, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah. The rural locations align with the Department's priority to meet the unique needs of Veterans in rural areas and will provide access for 136,000 Veterans who reside in sparsely populated areas where access to a national, state, or tribal Veterans cemetery is limited or does not exist.

Successful Federal-State Partnership: The authority Congress gave VA to provide grants to states, territories, and tribal organizations has fostered a critical and valuable partnership. Grants are used to establish, expand, or improve state, territorial, and tribal Veteran cemeteries in areas that do not qualify for a national cemetery. Since 1978 thru the end of FY 2014, VA has awarded more than \$614 million in such grants. Currently, there are 93 operational state and tribal Veteran cemeteries in 45 states, Guam and Saipan, with six more currently under construction. NCA looks forward to working with states, territories, and tribal organizations to share lessons learned from our new Urban and Rural Initiatives and to develop grant applications and award grants that reflect the needs, resources, and preferences of the local Veteran community.

Implementing a New Benefit for Veterans: NCA published a proposed rule in 2014 that outlined plans for implementing a new benefit program authorized by Congress in Public Law 112-260 to allow VA to provide a reimbursement for a casket or urn for a Veteran who will be interred in a VA national cemetery and who has no known next of kin, where there are no resources otherwise available to cover the cost of a dignified burial receptacle. We are striving to have the final rule published by in early 2015. NCA will provide reimbursements for deaths that date back to the effective date of the statutory provision, January 10, 2014. We appreciate the public comments that we received, including those from the National Funeral Directors Association. This new benefit also reflects the continued support and partnership of this subcommittee, as well as that of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, to ensure VA has the authorities it needs to honor the unclaimed remains of our Nation's Veterans.

Ensuring Burial of Unclaimed Remains of Veterans: In July 2014, NCA took steps to refine its processes to assist in following-up on those cases in which a Veteran is determined to be eligible but no burial arrangements are scheduled. VA defines a "pending" case as one in which VA has determined that a Veteran was eligible for burial after an initial inquiry, but the inquirer has not selected a date for burial in a VA national cemetery. The most recent review of all eligible "pending" cases over 30 days old, continued to find that the vast majority are waiting for the decedent's next of kin to select a burial date that is convenient for all family members. Only a few cases were pending in which a coroner's office, morgue, public administrator, or medical examiner was the authorized representative of the unclaimed remains of a Veteran. Although we provide families as much latitude as possible in determining the timing of burial, we continue to follow-up every 30 days with these public officials on any cases shown as pending until the cases are scheduled and the Veterans' remains are buried with honor.

Increased Flexibility to Apply for the Headstone and Marker Benefit: During the oversight hearing in October 2013, Members and various individuals and historic groups expressed concerns that the current definition of "applicant" for headstone and marker claims

is too limiting. In follow-up testimony before this subcommittee on March 26, 2014, VA acknowledged that the current regulatory definition of applicant was too restrictive, and stated that VA was drafting a proposed rule to amend the definition to address those concerns, and intended to solicit and consider comments from the public in connection with publication of that proposed rule. This rulemaking was listed on the Department's high priority rulemaking list to move it as expeditiously as possible.

On October 1, 2014, VA published a proposed rule (2900-AO95)—which began a 60-day comment period—in the Federal Register. In this rulemaking, we propose to amend the regulations defining who may apply for a headstone or marker. The intended effect of this proposed rule would be to expand the types of individuals who may request headstones and markers on behalf of decedents. This amendment would address concerns that the existing applicant definition is too restrictive and results in identified Veteran gravesites going unmarked. The comment period closed on December 1, 2014. As of November 25th, we received 148 comments, many of which supported our proposed revision to the definition. We look forward to responding to the comments in the final rule and will ensure that all public comments are fully considered in determining the final applicant definition.

WHAT ARE WE DOING NOW

ACTION FOR THE CURRENT FISCAL YEAR

While I am pleased to report on our recent successes, we cannot rest on our past accomplishments. We are moving forward to face several current challenges and advance several initiatives to better serve our Veteran customers. As we begin FY 2015, there are several major initiatives critical to NCA's achieving its strategic goals. They include opening new national cemeteries and continuing master planning efforts to meet the burial needs of our Nation's Veterans and Servicemembers; continuing gravesite accountability efforts; partnering with states and tribes to ensure all Veteran cemeteries meet customer needs and National Shrine standards; and hiring Veterans, including homeless Veterans. I will now review each of these initiatives in greater detail.

Opening of Two New National Cemeteries: In FY 2015, NCA will open two new national cemeteries: Tallahassee National Cemetery (FL) and Cape Canaveral National Cemetery (FL). We will begin design and construction on a third, the Omaha National Cemetery. The FY 2015 President's Budget request includes operating funds for these three cemeteries. These three facilities will serve approximately 350,000 Veterans and their eligible family members.

Continuous Improvement in Gravesite Accountability: When NCA testified before this subcommittee in April 2013, we addressed the findings of the recently completed review of all gravesites within the national cemetery system. We continue to build on the findings of that expansive review. From October 2011 to December 2012, NCA conducted a comprehensive review of the entire inventory of the 3.2 million headstones and markers within the 131 national cemeteries and 33 soldiers' lots administered by VA. Based on findings of independent checks by Memorial Service Network (MSN) teams, NCA noted in our February 2013 report to Congress that NCA leadership would conduct additional full reviews at 17 facilities to achieve reasonable assurance that all gravesites are accurately marked at those cemeteries. Cemetery and MSN staff members have continued to focus on these cemeteries to identify and fix issues at the local level. National-level reviews at these cemeteries, and at other cemeteries which NCA identifies for gravesite reviews, will employ enhanced techniques including use of Burial Operations Support System records and Geo-Spatial Information System (GIS) technology to permanently record key gravesite and headstone data.

NCA is developing a Scope of Work to begin the independent GIS location and marker analysis surveys in FY 2015. Eventually, NCA intends to use the same GIS-enabled processes to review all 131 of our national cemeteries and to automate our processes to incorporate state of the art positioning and mapping technologies.

Compliance Review Program for State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries: In FY 2015, NCA will reach full implementation of two new partnership initiatives through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. The Veterans Cemetery Grants Compliance Review

Program was launched in FY 2012 with the pilot program concluding in 2014. This program's primary goal is to align the process for evaluating the performance of grant-funded cemeteries with NCA's Organizational Assessment and Improvement Program (OAI). OAI evaluates the performance of VA's National Cemeteries against VA's Operational Standards and Measures to determine National Shrine status as well as to identify opportunities for improvement. All VA grant-funded Veterans cemeteries are required by regulation to follow NCA's Operational Standards and Measures. In FY 2015, the program will move into sustainment as a regular schedule of evaluation visits is implemented. Annually, the Compliance Review Program will develop a site review schedule with the objective of conducting on-site compliance reviews at all 90 grant-funded Veterans cemeteries at least once every 5 years.

Customer Survey Initiative for State and Tribal Veteran Cemeteries: The second partnership program conducted through the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program is an independently-administered customer satisfaction survey for those families and funeral directors who have selected burial in a state or tribal Veterans cemetery. The program is closely aligned to annual customer satisfaction survey methods used to assess VA national cemeteries' service to families and funeral directors. We plan to have the final report from the first survey issued by the end of December. We look forward to sharing the results of these surveys with you once they are available.

NCA's Veteran-Centric Workforce: NCA's committed, Veteran-centric workforce is the main reason we are able to provide world-class customer service. Not only are we focused on serving Veterans, we continue to maintain our commitment to hiring Veterans. Currently, Veterans comprise over 74 percent of our workforce, and 34 percent of Veterans appointed in FY 2014 were 30 percent or more disabled. In addition, 85 percent of NCA contracts in FY 2014 were awarded to Veteran-Owned and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned small businesses, which exceeded our established goal of 84 percent for the fiscal year.

Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program: In 2012, NCA stood up a Cemetery Apprenticeship Program in support of VA's initiative to end Veterans homelessness.

Apprentices are hired as WG-04 Cemetery Caretakers, using either a Schedule A or non-competitive Veterans hiring authority (30 percent disabled, Veterans Recruitment Act). We partnered with VA's Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program to identify potential candidates for the inaugural class and also the second cohort of apprentices, who just completed their training and will graduate December 5, 2014. Improvements made to the initial screening process for apprentice candidates contributed to a significantly improved retention rate from the first to second cohort (54 percent to 83 percent.) Apprentices spend a year learning their trade and receiving instruction in such areas as professionalism and conflict management. Graduates can choose to stay at their training cemetery or compete for other positions elsewhere in NCA, VA, and the Federal Government. We are proud to report that 10 former apprentices have already been promoted in NCA beyond their entry grade of WG-04.

Based on the success we have seen with the program in developing cemetery caretakers, we plan to expand the program in FY 2015 to include creation of a training pipeline for Cemetery Representatives, with targeted recruitment of homeless women Veterans. In addition to providing homeless Veterans with competitive Federal Government employment opportunities, the Cemetery Caretaker Apprenticeship Program has enabled NCA to increase diversity within our total workforce, as well among Veteran employees.

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT INTO THE FUTURE

As we look to the future, we must both maintain the gravesites of those who served during past conflicts and eras while we seek to identify the burial needs of our current Servicemembers and future Veterans.

Perpetual Care of Our VA National Cemeteries: We are continually seeking better and more efficient ways of managing our cemeteries. We place a high priority on environmental stewardship and managing facilities to maximize resources and at the same time, convey the dignity required of National Shrines. We believe it is possible to use resources efficiently and maintain our national cemeteries as National Shrines. NCA is recognized as an industry leader in environmental conservation efforts at cemeteries. These efforts reflect NCA's commitment to conserving resources, achieving cost savings and providing a dignified burial environment.

NCA's use of pre-placed crypts is an excellent example of a practice that both increases efficiency and enhances cemetery appearance. Their use reduces the cemetery footprint thereby requiring less land, decreasing the cost to maintain and operate cemeteries, and improving cemetery appearance. In addition, the use of memorial walls instead of memorial sections allows more grounds to be used for burials. Finally, undeveloped land is leased out for agricultural purposes so that there is some monetary return that can be used to improve cemetery appearance until the land is needed for burials.

Identifying Future Burial and Memorialization Needs of Our Veterans: The funeral industry and memorial practices and customs are changing at a fast pace in the 21st Century, especially with respect to cremation and the presentation of other burial options. In order to keep pace with changing memorial practices and customs, NCA has conducted an independent and extensive examination of new and emerging burial and memorial practices around the world as well as a nationwide survey of Veterans to ascertain their opinion and interest in burial and memorial options not currently offered in national cemeteries. Our strategic plan provides us the opportunity to assess the adequacy of our current practices

and benefits and to propose new policies/legislation if required to better meet Veterans' needs. NCA is in the process of reviewing the data collected by the study.

We are also working closely with VA's Center for Minority Veterans and the Office of Tribal Government Relations to identify and interact with key stakeholders. Understanding and meeting the burial and memorial needs of minority Veterans, such as Native American/Alaskan and Muslim American Veterans—two very fast-growing groups—is key to ensuring all Veterans are satisfied with the benefits available to them through VA.

CONCLUSION

Thank you, again, for having me here today to talk about the National Cemetery Administration. I look forward to continuing to serve Servicemembers, Veterans and their families as well as the employees of NCA. Both this subcommittee's as well as the full committee's support is evident and appreciated; we look forward to continuing our partnership with you. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have at this time.